

A *Blaze* of Volunteers



Story by
Randy MYERS

Photos by
Chris DAVIS

LDWF and AmeriCorps Team Up to Conserve Wildlife

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) owns and manages nearly 1.5 million acres of wildlife habitat across the state. These lands, which provide critical habitat for a variety of species, are included in 46 wildlife management areas (WMAs) and six wildlife refuges. These WMAs and refuges provide a significant amount of quality outdoor recreational opportunities. Although these opportunities may come in various forms, such as hunting, fishing, boating, birding, hiking and other outdoor pursuits, public access to them is made possible, in large part, thanks to Louisiana's WMA system.

Now 1.5 million acres is quite a bit of land. And on that land are thousands of species of wildlife whose existence depends on the responsible management of it. These areas change and grow, and so do their demands. To meet these demands, it is often necessary to employ the assistance of partnerships, which can provide support in planning, finances and even manpower.

In June of 2005, LDWF's Region 7 Wildlife Division staff teamed up with 10 members of the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) to complete a variety of wildlife projects on three wildlife management areas and one wildlife refuge in southeast Louisiana.

The AmeriCorps NCCC is a national service organization whose mission is to strengthen communities and develop leaders through national and community service. Volunteer members who hail from all over the country serve in teams to complete a variety of projects in areas such as education, public safety, disaster relief, environmental conservation and other community needs in various states.

Of course, LDWF recognized the value in applying for such a program and creating a partnership to accomplish the goals of wildlife conservation and stewardship. LDWF's WMAs and refuges provide many days of quality outdoor recreation for the public as well as providing critical habitat for a variety of species. However, volunteers were needed to help implement some projects that normally would not have been completed due to budgetary or manpower constraints.

In order to be considered as a host to AmeriCorps NCCC volunteers, LDWF applied for the necessary grant, including in its application detailed goals and objectives, as well as a complete

description of the proposed projects. Grants are awarded nationwide on a competitive basis.

On a state and national level, areas for outdoor recreation as well as quality wildlife and fish habitat are declining due primarily to development. Collectively, the completion of the projects helped to create, maintain and expand opportunities for user groups and help to ensure sustainable populations of wildlife.

One of the areas that benefitted from inclusion in the AmeriCorps/LDWF partnership is Sandy Hollow WMA. Sandy Hollow WMA is comprised of 3,515 acres owned by LDWF with 160 acres leased from the Tangipahoa Parish School Board. It is located approximately 10 miles north-east of Amite in Tangipahoa Parish.

Considered a longleaf pine ecosystem, the area is primarily managed for upland game birds such as quail and doves. Field trial courses and trails have also been established and receive considerable use. Quail, dove and woodcock hunting is considered good on the area. Deer, turkey and squirrel hunting is considered fair due to habitat limitations. Although the WMA is small as compared to other WMAs, it also serves as a valuable research area. Numerous habitat, game and non-game studies have been and are being conducted there.

The purpose of the project on Sandy Hollow WMA was to improve wildlife habitat through control of non-native invasive species, primarily cogon grass and Chinese tallow tree. These aggressive inva-



sive plants can deteriorate wildlife habitat and limit accessibility for both wildlife and humans. Although a native species, loblolly pine was also reduced to help eliminate competition with longleaf pine and to create a more open habitat for the establishment of native grasses. In addition, to help maintain the longleaf pine ecosystem on Sandy Hollow WMA, a controlled burn was conducted on approximately 200 acres. From this experience, volunteers learned about fire management and the role it plays in the management of a longleaf pine ecosystem.

The Eastern bluebird, a cavity nesting species, exists in this habitat as well. In the 1960s and 1970s, Eastern bluebird populations were on the decline primarily due to the loss of available cavities for nesting. It is thought that the increase in nest boxes for eastern bluebirds is responsible for recent increases in the population. Under the instruction of Jimmy Stafford, Region 7 Biologist, NCCC members helped construct and erect 30 boxes specifically designed for these cavity nesting species. The boxes were placed on metal posts along existing trails in open habitat.

Pearl River WMA also reaped the benefits of this partnership. It is located approximately six miles east of Slidell in St. Tammany Parish and totals 35,031 acres. Owned by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the terrain is flat, drainage is poor, and the area is subject to annual flooding.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the forest cover varied from an all-aged hardwood stand in the northern 60 percent, to cypress tupelo in the next 25 percent, and a fresh-

LDWF's Jimmy Stafford gives the volunteers a lesson in ATV safety. They also perfected their chainsaw and woodworking skills, among others, for the WMA projects.

Despite the grueling task at hand, an AmeriCorps volunteer smiles while digging holes for sign posts along the trail.